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U.N. Group Urges Release of American in Nicaragua

By Mary Slosson

(Reuters) - A [United Nations](#) group has called for the immediate release of a U.S. citizen serving a 22-year prison sentence in Nicaragua for drug trafficking and money laundering, concluding that he was wrongly convicted, his supporters said on Wednesday.

Jason Puracal, 34, was detained by Nicaraguan authorities in November 2010 and found guilty by a trial judge nine months later along with 10 co-defendants, all of them Nicaraguan nationals.

Those co-defendants testified that they had never met or worked with Puracal, and the prosecution's own witnesses said he was innocent, according to his legal team.

Puracal's supporters said he came under suspicion due to his job as a real estate agent, which gave him control over large sums of money held in escrow for property transactions and drew the attention of Nicaraguan law enforcement authorities.

In a May 24 opinion provided to Reuters by his legal team, the [United Nations](#) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found Puracal was arbitrarily imprisoned and recommended he be freed immediately. The report, given confidentially to the Nicaraguan government earlier this month, was released publicly by Puracal's supporters on Wednesday.

Puracal has become a cause celebre for human rights activists in the United States and around the world, with U.S. lawmakers appealing to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and a former high-ranking U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration official launching a massive petition drive on Puracal's behalf.

"There are thousands of American citizens who are detained around the world, and currently Jason Puracal is the only one who has the United Nations calling for him to be released," Eric Volz, founder of an international crisis resource organization called the David House Agency, told Reuters.

Volz, whose agency has assisted family members in seeking Puracal's release, was himself convicted of murder in the same Nicaraguan courtroom in 2006, eventually serving 14 months of a 30-year sentence in the same prison, La Modela, in Tipitapa, just east of the capital city, Managua.

A Nicaraguan appeals court overturned his conviction in December 2011, and Volz began advocating for those in similar situations. He has worked on behalf of Amanda Knox, the Seattle exchange student accused of murder in [Italy](#), and the American hikers jailed in [Iran](#) after allegedly straying over the Iraq-Iran border.

'HELL ON EARTH'

Puracal has fared well in the maximum-security prison where he is incarcerated, supporters say. The same prison houses many violent offenders, some with ties to drug cartels, according to Volz.

"It's just terrifying. That place is hell on Earth," Puracal's 33-year-old sister, Janis, told Reuters. "The prison is just loud and hostile, and there's so much violence around him."

Puracal is suffering from malnutrition and an inflammatory condition caused by the prison's food and water, according to his sister, who has visited him at the facility.

"The last time I was down there, he told me he was tired of dying in prison," Janis Puracal said. "That's really painful to hear, when it's your big brother who is saying that."

Puracal, a U.S. citizen born in Washington state, became a resident of Nicaragua after serving there as a Peace Corps volunteer in 2002, and he has married a Nicaraguan woman.

He was working at a real estate office in the Nicaraguan city of San Juan del Sur, a surfing destination on the Pacific Coast, when National Police agents wearing face masks and carrying AK-47 rifles searched the office without a warrant, according to his legal team.

Police then searched his home without a warrant before arresting him, his lawyers said. A judge later issued a retroactive authorization for his arrest.

GROUNDSWELL OF SUPPORT

The Nicaraguan government did not reply to the U.N. working group's requests for a report on Puracal's case, nor did it seek more time to respond, according to the group.

Puracal is represented by a team of lawyers in Nicaragua and abroad. One of them is Jared Genser, a human rights lawyer who previously has worked on behalf of former Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel and Nobel Peace Prize laureates Aung San Suu Kyi of [Myanmar](#) and Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

"Eighty to 90 percent of the time, governments typically respond (to U.N. queries) because they know failing to respond pretty much guarantees that they're going to lose," Genser told Reuters. "They chose to not even try to defend their actions."

The Puracal case has steadily drawn greater international attention. Earlier this month, 43 members of the U.S. House of Representatives signed a letter to Ortega asking for an independent review of the case.

In Washington, the U.S. State Department said on Wednesday it was aware of the U.N. group's opinion on the Puracal case.

"We obviously are continuing to work assiduously on Mr. Puracal's behalf through diplomatic as well as through consular channels," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters.

In April, the former head of DEA operations in Miami and the Caribbean who oversaw the case against late Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, Tom Cash, sponsored a petition asking the Nicaraguan ambassador to the United States to support an independent review of Puracal's case. Nearly 90,000 people have signed that petition.

Even the California Innocence Project, which normally focuses on wrongfully convicted inmates in that state's prison system, has taken up his cause.

"This has been an absolute nightmare for my family," Janis Puracal said. Her brother has a 5-year-old son with Down's syndrome who does not understand what has happened to his father, she added.

"When you're sentenced to 22 years in a Nicaraguan prison, you're not going to last 22 years," she said. "That's what we're terrified of, that Jason is not going to live to get out of prison. It's been 18 months and he's already starving to death, and he's dying there."